DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 091 297   SO 007 497

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TITLE   Psycho-Philosophic Concerns of Social Activists: The
                Need for Research and Curriculum Development.
PUB DATE   21 Nov 73
NOTE   12p.; Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the
                National Council for the Social Studies (53rd, San
                Francisco, November 21, 1973); For related documents,
                see ED 081 658 and SO 006 046

EDRS PRICE   MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS   *Activism; Citizen Participation; Civics; *Curriculum
                Development; Decision Making; Individual
                Characteristics; Individual Power; Philosophy;
                Psychological Characteristics; *Public Affairs
                Education; *Social Action; Social Change; Social
                Responsibility; Social Studies; *Student
                Participation

ABSTRACT
                Gaining "relevant" political knowledge, mastering
specific political-administrative competencies, and participating in
community processes -- all avenues of curriculum development for
political activism -- can be ineffective if a student has been unable
to resolve certain psycho-philosophic concerns. These concerns help
to explain the nature and extent of a person's approach to social
action; provide a framework for considering effective implementation
of curriculum; and can explain the difficulty a student has in taking
action either because he is unconscious of these issues or because he
has resolved them in a way that inhibits his ability to exert
influence. The concerns can be grouped as follows: achieving
commitment at the cost of openness or openness at the cost of
effectiveness, finding respect for persons a barrier to commitment to
cause and to change in institutions; determining the scope of one's
power and the role in which to employ it; maintaining personal
integrity in the face of challenges from all sides; and identifying
without prejudice one's motivation for involvement as being social or
personal. (Author/JH)

ED 091297

SP 007 497

Psycho-Philosophic Concerns of Social Activists: the Need for

Research and Curriculum Development

by

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Traditionally social studies educators have espoused as one of their objectives for students effective participation in community affairs. Much recent criticism has been directed at the teaching of government, history and other social studies subjects for failing to present knowledge relevant to this objective. Some critics propose that we teach less about the structure of government, more about the realities of political process, with special emphasis on how power is wielded informally within the system. Others suggest handbooks on community organizing, or tricks of the trade of the successful activist. The need for students to become involved in community-oriented projects in which students interact with the world beyond the school has been advocated. While I support each of these approaches, I believe they are not sufficient for enabling students to become more effective in exerting influence in public affairs.

The gaining of "relevant" political knowledge, the mastery of specific political-administrative competencies, the opportunity for community involvement can come to naught if a student has been unable to resolve what I refer to certain psycho-philosophic concerns. Suppose a person feels so overwhelmed by forces beyond his control that he cannot bring himself to act at all. Or suppose another feels so omnipotent that he sets goals which are impossible to achieve. Some people may be reluctant to act because they see public controversy as a form of interpersonal warfare, and they do not want to take part in hurting people. A potential activist may falter if he concludes that his principles must be compromised to such a degree that he will lose personal integrity. These are illustrative of a number of concerns, beliefs, attitudes, "hang-ups" which may be rooted in an individual's psychic structure and philosophical perspectives. They may be viewed as dilemmas whose resolution may help to explain the nature and extent of a person's approach to social action. I have classified a large number of concerns into the general categories of commitment and openness; persons versus causes and institutions; use of power; integrity; and personal motives and social justifications. These issues have not been documented through quantitative research. I propose them as an initial taxonomy, based on diverse reading in social science, my observations of young and adult activists, and my own participation in various citizen efforts to influence public policy.

I. Commitment and Openness

A number of apparently contradictory dispositions and orientations can be subsumed under the general problem of commitment and openness. On the one hand, an activist must be certain that his position is correct. He must be committed to pursue his goal, undaunted by attempts of adversaries or skeptics to prove him wrong or to predict his failure. On the other hand, he must remain receptive to criticism, to new information, to alternative interpretations, so that his action can be intelligently adapted to demands of the environment. In many situations he must be able to recognize the complexity of the problem he attacks, and the inevitable fact that almost always his action must be based on incomplete informa-

tion and evidence. On the other hand, if he refuses to act until "all the evidence is in" or until his proposed action has been proven correct beyond question, he will never be able to act, because the possibilities for continued study on social problems are infinite.

Taking decisive action in the face of uncertainty is especially difficult for persons who wish to "keep all options open" or who generally feel that the "grass is always greener." Such individuals tend to feel that by committing themselves to a certain course of action, they may miss out on something else that might come along. The extreme form of this ambivalence is seen in persons who can rarely finish a book, but can only taste small parts of many, in persons who never pursue a hobby in any sustained continuous way, but dabble in several. The person who attempts to learn "what he wants," or "what he is committed to" by continuous superficial exploration of alternatives may find himself never committed to anything. Certain psychological findings suggest that commitment or sustained involvement develops only if one actually takes a plunge, heavily investing himself in a cause or activity (Kanter, 1972). Erikson's (1959) notion of a psycho-social moratorium is an attempt to recognize the developmental need of a period which allows both for a certain amount of ambivalent dilettant-ism, but also for total personal investment and commitment in a focused direction.

In many situations the activist must have enough perseverance to work in the face of apparently overwhelming odds, on projects which last many days, months, or years. Feedback on the results of one's actions is often delayed far into the future, and praise, recognition and approval are infrequent rewards for one's work. This suggests that the activist have the courage and the strength to continue a long arduous battle. On the other hand, he must be realistic enough not to waste energy on efforts that cannot be successful no matter how total the commitment. Knowing that a refusal to try, or giving up, simply because one predicts failure can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, the activist must be willing to commit himself to work in the face of serious obstacles, yet realizing that one's energy is limited, he must be selective in choosing only those battles where success seems feasible.

Another manifestation of the problem of balance between commitment and openness involves the conflict between systematic planning, organized anticipation on the one hand versus flexibility and spontaneity on the other. Persons who are for the most part present-oriented will have difficulty planning for future contingencies. Some are extremely cautious about excessive planning of a program or campaign, fearing that one will become a slave to one's structure and will not be able properly to respond to circumstances as they arise. Others prefer a more systematic attempt at future planning for all contingencies, fearing that a looser, "play-it-by ear" approach will be too unorganized and ineffective. The art is to arrive at some balance that incorporates the advantages and avoids the pitfalls of each orientation.

II. Persons vs. Causes and Institutions

To influence public policy, to affect institutions, to resolve issues, to fight for causes, one must relate to individual persons-- colleagues, adversaries, potential supporters and opponents, and persons

important to the activist who may not be directly related to the
issues (e.g., parents, friends, etc.). One's regard for and
relationships to such persons often becomes a problem in the context of
a social struggle. How such problems are resolved affects not only
the interpersonal world of the activist, but also the outcome of his
efforts on institutions and policy.

Reluctance to become involved in public affairs may result from
a general belief that such involvement almost inevitably results in
deterioration in interpersonal relations, or at least a lack of attention
to the needs of each human being as a special person. Some point to
the danger that in the midst of social causes, people become objectified:
adversaries become targets to defeat, replace, to prove wrong, supporters
become means to an end--votes, dollars, bodies, troops. The attempt
to achieve the social goal (stopping a war, passing an equal rights law,
lowering taxes) in the most rational, efficient way often obscures the
importance of personal needs of adversaries and supporters alike. Given
the conviction that every human being is deserving of certain moral
respect as a unique person, we are warned that through such objectifica-
tion, as people become cogs in a larger struggle, this basic value will
be forgotten. An extension of this argument is that rather than con-
centrating on problems of policy or institutional change, all people should
simply put their energy into becoming humane and understanding with each
person they encounter. If everyone did this, it is argued, there would
be virtually no need to worry about equitable public policies.

There are psychological explanations for this plea to focus more
on the quality of interpersonal relationships than on matters of insti-
tutional policy. For adolescents, identification with particular persons
outside the family may be critical in the development of identity. If a
major developmental task is the working out of interpersonal relationships
among peers and adults, then we would expect the adolescent's choice of
causes or issues to be a result of his being turned on or off to certain
people, and we would expect him to focus primarily on the quality of inter-
personal relationships as opposed to the manifest social cause for which
he works. Concentrating upon personal relationships also usually provides
more immediate feedback and reinforcement as to "how one is doing"--a
psychological benefit that abstract causes or institutions cannot provide.

The activist may understand these observations and deliberately
attempt to become sensitive to the "human" aspects of attempting to
influence public affairs. If he is overly responsive to personal needs,
however, progress toward achieving his goal can be retarded in at least
two ways. First there is the danger that because of human respect for
one's adversary, one will incorporate enough of the adversary's position
into one's own so that one becomes co-opted, that is, one no longer works
toward the goal or policy he originally favored. Instead, he begins
to support the original adversary or at least to tone down his action so
as not to oppose the adversary. Second, the activist might show such respect
for the feelings of his colleagues and such a desire to resolve all
questions of interpersonal tension that it becomes impossible to mobilize
group organization toward completion of a task. One result of becoming
sensitive to individual personal needs is that individual differences may
become so accentuated that colleagues no longer feel united in a common
cause, except possibly for improved human relations among themselves.

The point of these observations is to support neither a person-oriented nor a cause-oriented position, but to indicate that those people who wish to exert influence in public affairs must recongize a dilemma: on the one hand, the activist must not allow his commitment to the cause to dull his sensitivity to people as individual humans (this sensitivity is necessary both as a basic moral premise, but also instrumentally to assist one in being effective); on the other hand, the activist must not allow his concern for personal needs and harmonious interpersonal relationships to deter progress toward justifiable public policy.

III. Use of Power

An activist makes several choices concerning the use of power. First is the general problem of defining the scope of one's action. Given an almost infinite number of issues or causes, the activist must realize that because of limited time and resources, he must choose only certain issues on which to take an active stand. Selecting a few from among many issues is frequently troublesome, especially for those individuals who cannot admit that they are deliberately ignoring certain causes in order to work for others. However painful the process, one must establish priorities, or else the limited power he has can be diffused too widely to exert any influence at all. In addition to making priority judgments about the type of issues he will work on (peace, environment, consumer protection, civil rights, welfare reform), he must also make a choice about the scale of his objectives. Institutional changes of worldwide significance can be too ambitious. Instead, he should begin to work toward smaller steps that might cumulatively add up to significant influence over time: disseminating some information about an issue, working for the election of a sympathetic official, developing an organization, etc. Enthusiastic commitment to the "smaller steps," to problems over which he does have the ability to exert influence is crucial. At the same time, he cannot become so obsessed with the local, more immediate and manageable issues that he diverts attention from the ultimate objective. A person who attempts to take on the Defense Department before he has the support of neighbors belonging to a local peace group will probably not succeed. On the other hand, if he spends all his life trying to persuade a stubborn neighbor, he will certainly never get to the Defense Department.

A second problem in the use of power is the extent to which the activist construes himself as leader and follower. The general image of a person attempting to exert influence in public affairs conveys a quality of assertiveness and leadership, yet it is not my intent to suggest that everyone become a leader. Obviously the successful exercise of influence depends upon a great deal of cooperation, delegation of authority and power within groups. To participate in such a process, those inclined to assert themselves and lead must realize that in so doing, they must be careful not to deny power and responsibility to those inclined to follow, lest a movement become a one-man show which is usually doomed to failure. Conversely, those inclined to follow must feel enough of an investment in the task so as not to accept orders blindly, but to assert their own power within the movement. Needless to say, the resolution of authority and power conflicts within a group is crucial to its success. The activist whether inclined basically as a leader or follower must continually examine the way in which he exercises power within his group. Neither doing it all yourself nor letting someone else do it all are satisfactory solutions.

Another manifestation of the leader-follower problem can be seen in the contrast between a <u>service-maintenance</u> versus a <u>change</u> orientation to the use of one's power. In a service-maintenance orientation, persons and institutions invite the assistance of an activist, who attempts to please the client or recipient of his efforts. However, a change orientation implies that an activist has his own agenda which the recipient usually opposes because it involves his bending to the activist's will. Volunteer work at the prison, Head Start Center, or home for the elderly would fall into the first category. Attempts to have the School Borad adopt a student bill of rights, a Black Student's Union, and to abolish grading illustrate the second. By and large, advocacy for public policy is not considered a "service" by those to whom proposals and protests are addressed. Rather, it is a struggle by certain actors to persuade other actors to change their ways. This is not to imply that change cannot be induced through the service-maintenance orientation. Tutoring programs may change students, Peace Corps volunteers may change living conditions, volunteer clean-up for the Park Department may improve the condition of the parks; but these kinds of changes are intended to service the interests of hosts. In contrast, however, the crusades of a Ralph Nader are perceived--at least initially--as contrary to the interests of the target of the action.

From this one might conclude that students undertaking change-- oriented projects will have far more difficulty completing their tasks than students undertaking service-maintenance projects. This observation alone, however, should not discourage people from attempting change- oriented action. The severity of struggle may be determined more by idiosyncracies of particular projects: persuading a school administration to supply .draft counseling (advocating change) might be easier to accomplish for a group of students than providing effective tutoring for low-income students (service-maintenance).

Since the change agent is so often in the role of attempting to manipulate the lives of others, or to bend their will to his, he is not likely to gain much sense that he is meeting others' needs. This might explain the social activists'feelings of loneliness and isolation. Joining an organization whose purpose is social change may be one way to compensate for such feelings. The activist, as a volunteer, can now help to service and maintain the organization, finding perhaps the comfort of meeting the needs and following the will of fellow humans (i.e., those in the organization), yet at the same time struggling to change those on the outside.

In a sense the service-maintenance orientation implies the role of follower (one caters to the needs of others) while the change orientation suggests more independent leadership (one attempts to control or guide others). To avoid construing activism as falling exclusively into only one of these categories, a transactional interpretation should be considered. Here action is not viewed as a one-way process (I-help you, or I-change you), but as a process in which the activist and the recipient or target of action grow mutually. The activist in this role suspends enough of his agenda to listen to and respond to the needs of his client or target (on the assumption that he, the activist, will benefit therefrom), yet he does not become the total servant of the recipients's agenda, for it is also assumed that the recipient will benefit from exposure

to the activist's own change-oriented goals. The purpose of action
in the transactional sense is synergetic growth, not a one-dimensional,
cause-effect result.*

A third problem occurs in situations where the activist is forced
to use power in ways that inevitably seem to hurt others. Suppose he
works for an organization that has limited funds and can hire only one
staff member. There are ten well-qualified applicants for the job, all
of whom desperately need the income, but nine must be turned away.
Decisions on priority items in a budget can similarly result in giving
resources to some people, denying them to others. Adolescents who
have been given the power to govern alternative schools often show a
reluctance to use power over their fellows. Many are not even satisfied
with a majority rule system of deciding disputes, because they feel no
person or group should exert any power over another. In addition to
the reluctance to make policy that may deny some people their wishes,
adolescents will often not participate in enforcing policy if it involves
prescribing penalties or sanctions on individuals. With all the
rhetoric about power to the people, and student participation in
governance, we must recognize that attainment of such power poses
continuing dilemmas, as the activist must decide who is to benefit the
most from his use of power. This issue also relates to problems
discussed under persons vs. causes and institutions.

IV. Integrity

A persisting dilemma for many activists is how to continue to
work toward a goal without "selling out" or violating one's integrity.
This struggle manifests itself in many forms, and is felt with varying
degrees of severity. A person feels strongly that a public act is wrong
and he wants to denounce it harshly, yet he knows he must quell the
vehemence of his expression if he is to exert influence in appropriate
places. In a bargaining situation, he must decide whether to stand
firm and press for all demands which he feels justified, or to compromise
on some issues for the sake of victory on others. Should he work for
a candidate who fails to measure up to his standards, but who never-
theless seems preferable to all the alternatives? To preserve his image
and credibility, he may agree to do things which he would otherwise
never do (e.g., cutting his hair and dressing up, attending meetings or
social functions he despises). He may participate in volunteer work
which he feels to be poorly managed, yet withhold his criticism if he
feels it would have a destructive effect on reaching the ultimate
goal.

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*For a more thorough treatment of this problem, see Freire, 1970
and Hampden-Turner, 1970.

The successful resolution of such problems requires more than advice to the activist that "compromise is often necessary." These issues can make demands on a person which go beyond a call for flexibility in tactics or approaches. To demonstrate flexibility or reasonableness a person may sometimes be required to revise or modify strongly held objectives that symbolize profound philosophical and moral commitments. Sticking by one's objectives or principles in the face of serious opposition should not necessarily be considered inflexible rigidity, an artifcial attempt to save face or honor, or impractical politics. Actions that might be interpreted this way can have ramifications that touch one's identity as a person. When compromise means to the activist that he is called upon to violate that part of himself which constitutes the "sameness and continuity" (Erikson, 1960) that defines his very existence, questions of poltical strategy can be inextricably entwined with the very personal question, "Who am I?" In this sense, the question of compromise can have deep psychological and philosophical significance. If curriculum is to assist a person in exerting influence in public affairs, it must help him examine which compromises can be justified in terms of objective and ultimate policy gcals and in terms of possible threats to or violations of one's personal identity.

V. Personal Motives and Social Justifications

Although we have recommended that the activist justify his attempts to influence public policy through a process of moral reasoning that can be examined in public, we must recognize that the formal rational _justification_ one gives for engaging in a particular action is not a sufficient _explanation_ of his behavior. "Why" a person becomes involved can also be explained on the basis of personal needs that may seem irrelevant to the formal justification. There are a variety of ways of describing such personal needs or motives, and some of them are more available to conscious examination than others. We might ask, for example, if one's involvement in action might be meeting one's personal needs at the expense of others': "Might my attempt to help others reflect a need of mine to manipulate or control them, or to foster their dependence on me, or to demonstrate my superiority?" We can wonder about the extent to which one's involvement is based mainly on what is currently popular: "Might my involvement in this campaign be based on a transient sense of excitement, being part of an 'in' issue, rather than sticking with a more permanent commitment that may not always attract attention?"

In one project we inquired about students' views of the main function of their social action efforts. For some students, personal learning is the major function. They become involved primarily because they want to develop individual skills, gain knowledge about specific problems, broaden their understanding of groups of people with whom they have not previously come in contact, gain information on possible vocational interests, etc. The individual student sees the activity as contributing to his individual education or growth. The main function of participation in this sense is _self-education_.

Other students, by outward appearance more "militant" and committed
to a cause, see the completion of a task or project as the major
function of their activity. The object is to persuade the Council
not to rezone the land, to publish a group newspaper, to elect a
candidate, to raise money for the poor, to organize a peace rally, or
to provide reliable volunteer service. Though students feel they learn
while carrying out their projects, self-education is seen not as the
central focus, but as a fortunate by-product of the activity. The central
mission is to complete a successful project, to produce results. This
function we label task completion.

Many students see neither self-education nor task completion as
the major purpose of their involvement in a social action project. Their
goal may be simply to escape the routine, the pressures, and the demands
of ordinary courses; to find a chance to relax, to rap with friends
informally; to get away from adults; or to be "entertained" by guest
speakers or field trips. Such concerns can be summarized as the function
of recreation.

Finally, we notice students who seem to have no identifiable view
of the purpose or function of their involvement in social action. They
do not seem to be interested in either learning, completing a project,
or "having fun." Such students seem to pass through school mindlessly,
without a sense of purpose, almost as if they were under anesthesia.
The student appears to be in a state of suspension from involvement or
choice. The function of social action (or probably any other activity)
for such a student is only another context for hibernation.

In asking whether the social justification for one's involvement
is compatible with personal motives, one might identify important
contradictions. A student whose primary motive for involvement in an
electoral campaign is to learn something about political process may
shun routine clerical work, feeling that he could learn more if he
participated in top level policy discussions with "the heavies." In
this case pursuit of his personal motives might reduce chances of winning
the election.

Personal motives might also be approached by examination of different
roles of the activist. Some students are primarily concerned with
helping others, often in a one-to-one relationship as in volunteer
work in day care centers, homes for the elderly, tutoring programs, etc.
These we might call the "good samaritans." Others are primarily interested
in fighting for something of direct benefit to themselves: securing a
bill or rights for students, developing citywide bike trails, trying to
establish a Black Students' Union. Because these students have a more
tangible self-interest in the outcome of their work, they can be called
the "bested interest advocates." Finally there are students who work for
broader social causes: achieving world peace, developing a rational
city plan, diminishing pollution, improving police-community relations.
These are issues in which the activist often does not appear to have
an immediate tangible personal stake. Neither are such issues focused
on helping a particular constituency. Activists in this category can
be said to operate more in the role of "social planner" or "everyone's
citizen" working for the betterment of the community at large.

We can ask about possible motivations underlying such roles.
Might the effort to engage in one-to-one personal helping situations
be an attempt to escape the conflict and complexity involved in vested
interest advocacy? Might extensive involvement in vested interest
advocacy reflect insensitivity to needs of others, or lack of willingness
to concern oneself with the total community? Might the social planner
orientation involve a desire to remain distant from the concrete, day-
to-day needs of individual humans, and in some sense reveal a desire
to control whole communities or institutions? These are just a few
of the kinds of questions that might help a person view personal motives
in the context of the social justification for his acts.

The point of distinguishing between personal motives and social
justification is not to imply that one's action is less legitimate or
contaminated if personal motives are attached to it. Quite the contrary.
It is hoped that the attempt to exert influence in public affairs will
bring joy, recreation, humor, intimacy, adventure and other personal
benefits to the activist--benefits that may not be relevant to the public,
rational justification for his policy aims. Alinsky (1971), for example,
argues that it is important for the activist to have a good time, not
simply from the point of view of individual benefit, but also in order
to be effective in the struggle. He even claims that part of the
reason for failures of radical new left elements was their lack of a
sense of humor. Because one's personal motives and needs can serve to
enhance or inhibit one's ability to exert influence in public affairs,
it seems important to examine them explicity, especially as they
relate to the more public justification of one's efforts.

What are the implications for social studies curriculum of the
various psycho-philosophic concerns raised thus far? There may be two
tasks for curriculum depending upon the students' general needs.
First there are those students who have difficulty in acting either
because they seem never to have consciously considered these issues,
or because they have resolved them in a way that inhibits their ability
to exert influence; for example, the student who has "resolved" the
commitment-openness dilemma by becoming so dogmatic that people "tune
him out." For these students, the task of curriculum is to create materials,
experiences, styles of interaction which encourage a student
consciously to examine (or re-examine) such dilemmas, rather than to
neglect them or resolve them in ways that prevent effective action.
Second, there are students who have already become aware of some of these
issues, and by struggling with them have become paralyzed by their
inability to arrive at perfect solutions, for example, a student who
refuses to participate in an environmental clean-up, because he
claims it attacks only a symptom of the problem. He also refuses to
participate in any effort to reform the economic system, which he calls
the heart of the problem, because he feels that problem is too big
and complex. Curriculum for these students will require materials,
experiences, styles of interaction which not only help to define
aspects of the dilemma, but which seek an admittedly imperfect
resolution, and an acceptance of the possiblity of deriving
satisfaction from acting on the basis of those admittedly

imperfect resolutions. The extent to which curriculum on such concerns would emphasize psychological counseling, study of basic philosophical issues, further social research, etc., is a problem for future development.

I do not mean to suggest that these psycho-philosophic concerns are unique to the activist. They represent a number of more general problems of the human condition and could be seen as raising the most ultimate and complicated questions of developing a philosophy of life or a healthy psyche. Some might argue, therefore, that they cannot be resolved through the narrow educational aim of assisting students to exert influence in public affairs, becasue (A) we do not know enough to solve such problems, or (B) even if we did, we do not, as social studies teachers, have access to enough of the student's life to make an impact with regard to such fundamental issues. To the first point, I can only urge that through curriculum development and research we try to learn more about the definition and "successful" resolution of such issues. Second, if we believe that increasing student ability to exert influence should be a major objective, and if we are able to learn what kinds of curriculum and resources are required to assist students in this venture, then we must seek whatever additional resources (cooperation with parents, community organizations, teachers of other subjects, etc.) which seem necessary to make a significant impact.

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